THE NEW REPUBLIC
20 MARCH 1971




# The Odyssey of Robert Williams

by Georgie Anne Geyer

Of all the mysterious voyagers in the shadow worlds of revolutionary politics, perhaps no American has traveled so curious a route as Robert F. Williams. Hunted on an apparently trumped-up civil rights kidnapping charge in North Carolina in 1962, the black NAACP leader fled to Cuba. There he made anti-American broadcasts aimed at American blacks, until he tired of Fidel Castro's application of the "class struggle" to the American racial fight. He journeyed to North Vietnam, North Korea and, finally, China, where he stayed for three years as a prized guest. Today he is employed as a consultant in the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan (the next best thing for him, since they do not have a department of clandestine arts) and is beginning a book about his experiences in China.

Intelligence sources in Washington say the old North Carolina charges are "dormant and going to stay dormant." Williams fears they are still pending – at least, he is still unable to leave the state of Michigan because of them. Treason charges, which could be placed against him for broadcasts? These same sources look blank – who would do such a thing to Williams?

All of us who covered or worked in civil rights found Williams' case interesting. I recall very well the bizarre "kidnapping" – actually the holding of a white couple for a few hours as protection against official homicide against civil righters – and I remember when Williams turned up suddenly in Cuba. When I went there in the summer of 1966 and asked about him, there was a chorus of hemming and hawing. Finally the Foreign Office people told me, without much conviction, that he had left and gone to China. Then, suddenly, in September, 1969, he was back in the United States. His ride home was better publicized than his ride to Cuba. He was flying back on TWA, just like any other traveler, when he was taken off the plane in London and held six days in prison.

"Why don't they let me go on?" he asked his jailers. One replied, "They're afraid you'll hijack the plane." "Hijack the plane!" he said, "Hell, I've already been in all the places you hijack planes to!"

Unwilling to fly a "dangerous radical" with other folks, TWA gave him and his lawyer a private jet to New York. "They told me it cost them $20,000," Williams told me. I had paid $500, and all I wanted to do was fly on a regular [illegible] me a $20,000 ride, it was okay with me."

When I found him in Detroit recently, at his brother's home in suburbia, I was immediately charmed. Good-looking, wearing a well-trimmed Afro goatee and an African-patterned shirt, he showed a quick intelligence, an informed judgment and, above all, a highly developed sense of humor about everything that had happened to him.

Cuba? "Remember in the South they used to slap the black man on the back and give him a cigar? Well, it's the same in Cuba, only it's a Havana cigar."

Williams was not mistreated by the Cubans. On the contrary, he was a member of the elite, with his own house, car and gasoline plus $400 a month as an allowance. Nor did his troubles, particularly in the beginning, when he says he was "extremely bitter" against the United States, revolve around any idea he would not say what the Cubans wanted him to say.

A typical broadcast, on Jan. 19, 1963, for instance, went: "Johnnyboy Kennedy paid a surprise visit to a convention of what he called 'Negro women sororities.' Man, these phoney politicians are a riot when they want black votes. Now, can you just imagine slick John putting himself out for the black bottom chicks?"

In his NAACP job, Williams had been an integrationist. After his Cuban experience he became a black nationalist and separatist, and it was then that his troubles started. The Cubans insisted that the black American's natural allies were the white working class. "I openly disputed this," Williams told me. "I had found that the whites in the South who helped us were the intelligentsia. The farmers and the millworkers . . . were the ones trying to kill us and standing on the sides jeering. One day, the municipal leader of the party in Havana called me and said he couldn't support my position – that was in '64. One reason they couldn't support black nationalism, he said, was that it advocated division and self-determination. If they supported us . . . well, they had a heavy concentration of black people in Oriente province. What would happen if *they* wanted self-determination? I told him I understood their predicament. I said that in the US people who made compromises like that were called Uncle Toms. I wasn't going to be an Uncle Tom for capitalism, or for socialism, either."

He was particularly irked when Blas Roca, one of [illegible] scolded him. "He



Continued